



Common Houseplant Issues

- **Container Problems:** Confinement/lack of room to grow, container too large, little or no drainage.
- **Stressful conditions:** drafts, under/over watering, too warm/cold, not enough humidity, over/under fertilizing
- **Disease:** Leaf spot, Powdery Mildew.
 Remove leaves that show suspicious spots. This interrupts the life cycle by removing spores. Keep leaf surfaces dry, because most of these fungi need damp conditions to survive.
 Stem and root rot is caused by fungus. Overwatering often contributes to this problem, especially when combined with cool temperatures. Root rot also can become established when roots are damaged during repotting if the container or soil is contaminated.
 Fungicides are mostly used preventatively, before a disease becomes serious. Once the tissue is dead, it only continues to deteriorate. Leaf tissues do not regenerate once they have been devastated by fungus. If the plant is shriveled or collapsed and you suspect root rot, remove it from its container and inspect for rot. Change out old soil and use a clean container. Scrub the container with soapy water and dip it in a solution of ½ cup bleach to a gallon of water and let it dry. Make sure the container isn't too big. Prune back the plant at least by 1/3rd to stimulate new growth.
- **Disorders:** If you suspect a plant is plagued by a disorder, make sure the plant is given enough light and night temperature is followed. Pay closer attention to watering and feeding.
 - **Weeping:** Philodendron and other plants will produce droplets of moisture when they are overwatered. Increase air circulation while reducing frequency of watering.
 - **Edema:** Succulents will show corky bumps on the leaves. This is caused by Overwatering, which causes the cells to rupture on the stems and leaf undersides. Affected leaves will eventually turn yellow and fall off. Keep the plant warmer with good light and water less often.
 - **Leaf shed:** There are many reasons for this. Over/under watering or changes in light or temperature. It could also be a normal growth pattern for that specific plant. Many plants shed a few leaves in the weeks after they are moved, but if it continues to shed despite good care, it should be checked to see if it needs repotting. Green leaves usually mean overwatering and yellow means under watering.
 - **Failure to Thrive:** Air pollution can cause plants to fail, as well as soil that is compacted, or containers that are too small, especially in older plants.
 - **Brown leaf tips:** Soluble salts in the soil or water cause one of the most common problems. If the plant goes too dry or is over fertilized the salts will show up in the leaf tips of the plant, especially plants with long thin leaves.
 - **Fungus:** Fungi also cause disease. Look for dark, dirty-looking deposits on healthy leaves. This blackish dirt could be sooty mold caused by honeydew deposits from insects. This can be washed off with warm soapy water, and look for the culprit causing the problem.
- **Seasonal or Year-Round Plants:** Sometimes plants have a lifespan of just a few weeks while others may stay for decades.
 - **How to decide when to give up on a struggling plant:** Some plants will die because they are annual (flowered and gone to seed). Others are just going dormant. See if the plant rests at certain times of the year. Research the plant's natural environment and try to replicate it. Some plants become



overgrown and woody; pruning them aggressively and possibly propagating some of the cuttings can rejuvenate and create vigorous new growth.

- **Double Watering:** Flush out the soil in a container by drenching it with water to remove excess salts. In situation where a container has dried out completely, watering the plant twice will restore the moisture level in the pot, flushing out excessive salts and rehydrating parched plants.
- **Drainage:** The process through which water moves through roots and soil is call drainage. When drainage is slow, roots are forced to sit in water, which can cause them to run short of oxygen and possibly rot. When drainage is fast, roots/ soil may not have time to take up water before it disappears and dries out too fast. Potting medium and the number (and size) of holes in the bottom of the container will also affect drainage, as well as the shape of the container-tall skinny pots will drain quickly, while short, squatty pots will drain more uniformly.

****All houseplants need pots with a drainage hole!** Plants will grow best when allowed to dry out slightly between watering. Some plants vary in their drainage requirements. Cacti like fast-draining soil, while Peace Lilies like slow-draining. Lining the bottom of the pot with pebbles will decrease your drainage. I advise using a paper coffee filter or weed barrier fabric. This will slow down the drainage, but still allow the water to flow through, allowing good oxygen exchange. If there is a problem with drainage, just lay the pot on its side and open the blocked holes with a skewer, awl, or pencil.

- **Fertilizer:** The primary energy source of plants is **LIGHT**, but they also need nutrients that support growth.
 - **General Rule:** fertilize when plants are actively growing, usually spring through fall, when light levels are high, or when plants are kept under artificial light.
 - **Use fertilizer half strength:** there is no way you can over-fertilize if you go half strength. And use clear water in-between watering. Most fertilizers are safe to use every time you water, but it is recommended to flush out excess salts/fertilizer between feedings.
 - **Feed plants when soil is moist:** dry soil causes salt problems. Also, the plant may take up too much fertilizer if the plant has been stressed by dry conditions. Hydrate the soil first with clear water, and then fertilize at half-strength.
 - **Don't feed newly purchased plants:** or plants that have been moved to a new place. The plant needs to adjust to its new location first.
 - **Wait 6 weeks after plant has been transplanted:** Most soils have enough organic material to feed the plant for several months. Generally, if you see new growth, it's okay to fertilize.
 - **Don't feed if the plant is sick:** fertilizer will not help a sick plant; it can cause more problems than good. Check for other problems.

N-P-K

- **N Nitrogen:** The first number on a box of fertilizer; supports the production of new stems and leaves. Young plants and foliage benefit from lots of N. This is an acid formula for **green** plants. Plants that need a lot of nitrogen: Azaleas, Gardenias, Citrus, and all foliage houseplants.
- **P Phosphorous:** The second number in the sequence; is essential for all plants. Plants are encouraged to produce roots, buds, and blossoms. High Phosphorous will help most blooming plants.
- **K Potassium:** The third number; improves the function of the roots, and supports the plants ability to move moisture and nutrients to all of their tissues. Potassium helps the overall health of the plant.



- ❖ 20-20-20 is a balanced fertilizer. Good all-purpose for most houseplants.
- ❖ 15-30-15 is high phosphorous for (blooms and roots) great for blooming plants.
- ❖ 30-10-10 is high nitrogen (leaves and stems) great for acid loving plants.
- ❖ 5-1-1 is high nitrogen low number usually (found in an organic mix's) excellent for edible plants, like herbs and citrus.
- **Signs of too little fertilizer**
 1. Weak new growth in which new leaves are small and pale. Add an all-purpose fertilizer and the leaves should darken up in just a few days. Also the plant may be stressed from too much light.
 2. Dark green veins and yellow leaves indicate iron deficiency. Feed with a high Nitrogen fertilizer with chelated iron.
- **Signs of too much fertilizer**
 1. Very dark, lush leaves with some browning or curling of leaf edges suggest feeding too often or too much. Leech soil by double watering.
 2. Blooming plants may refuse to produce buds, or buds may fall off. This indicates too much nitrogen, and not enough phosphorous. Lack of humidity may also cause bud drop.

Grooming: To keep plants looking their best, take time to remove yellow leaves and stems that are withered or brown. Try to avoid damaging the plant by cutting rather than pulling. A good pair of sharp shears or scissors works best.

Health patrol: As you remove withered or yellow leaves, check your plant for evidence of insect pests or disease. When entire branches show signs of pest problems, go ahead and snip it off. Remove leaves that have fallen on the soil's surface-they can harbor diseases and insects.

Precautions: Most leaves that are shed by the plant are not troubled by pests. Shedding leaves is more often the plants way of letting go of the old and making way for the new. The plant will benefit from improved air circulation and increased light exposure. If you see a lot of green leaves on the floor, it usually indicates that you are watering too frequently, or letting the plant sit in water for too long (multiple days). If you see yellow leaves, it can be normal or also mean that you've gone a little too dry.

Humidity:

Most houseplants originally came from humid jungle environments, and have probably spent years in greenhouses. Modern homes and offices are quite arid, especially in winter when heated air becomes extremely dry. Leaf tips and edges may become dry and turn brown and the plant may shed its inner leaves. Plants with thin leaves, or those with long skinny leaves, tend to suffer most from lack of humidity. Most plants will acclimate to drier conditions. You can help by providing a humid place for them. Try using a pebble tray, an oversized saucer filled with gravel and a small amount of water. Be careful the plant is not sitting in the water, but on top of the gravel. This evaporation will help increase humidity.

- **Misting** the undersides of the leaves on plants from time to time when the air is very dry is a sound practice, but you should not mist heavily without a specific purpose in mind. **Do** mist the entire plant that is at high risk of developing problems with spider mites (which thrive in dry conditions) using distilled or filtered water. This will keep water spots from getting all over the leaves. Lightly mist the



upper and lower sides of the leaves of plants that are new to your home as you slowly acclimatize them to drier conditions. This can take a few weeks.

- **Humidifier:** If your plants require extremely high humidity, like Gardenias and Hibiscus, humidifiers or foggers work well.

Insect Pests:

The most common insects that easily colonize on our plants are: Aphids, Fungus Gnats, Mealy bugs, Scale, Spider Mites, Thrips and White Fly.

The most common way for these insects to gain entry to your home or office is by hitching a ride on new plants. Always keep new plants separated for about 2 to 3 weeks. Most insects will choose a host plant and stick with it.

In addition to looking for insects, look for what they leave behind, like honeydew (sticky sweet substance on top of leaf surface) or droppings, like skins or scat. Sometimes you will see a fine web or stippled leaves. Very rarely will you see holes in the leaves except if it is a very large insect like a slug or caterpillar.

For more information about controlling common pests, click [here](#).